

## Loneliness, Peer Relations, and Language Disorder in Childhood

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### **Abstract:**

Children with Language disorders boom higher than average rates of peer relationship problems, suggesting that they are also AC risk far loneliness, A review or research on loneliness as an emotional consequence of peer relationship difficulties in childhood is preceded by a discussion of the Funicular relevance of this literature for children with language difficulties. Evidence from research on loneliness indicates the peer acceptance participation in friendship, friendship quality, and victimization by peers each contribute to children's feelings of loneliness at school. Suggestions are made concerning intervention efforts to reduce loneliness for children with language problems.

### **Article:**

"...you've got nobody to talk to, nobody...sometimes you cry...nobody to see you"; "...like, I don't 'have a friend, and it's sort because I don't have a friend and nobody to like me"

~two elementary school children interviewed by Williams & Asher, 1992

Research with school-age children in regular education classrooms indicates that approximately 8-12% of children report extreme feelings of loneliness at school. Consider, for example, a study in which third- through sixth-grade children were asked about their feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction at school (Asher, Hynel, & Renshaw, 1954). In this study, 18% of the children responded to the item "I'm lonely" by indicating that this was "always true about me," and another 5.6% said "that's true about me most of the time." As high as these figures appear to b-c, they could be an underestimate of the degree of loneliness children experience, given that it is not socially desirable to admit to loneliness in our culture (Rotenbers Kmill, 1992). There may be many children who feel quite lonely but do not wish to acknowledge this to others or even to themselves.

Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the prevalence of loneliness among children with language impairments is higher than the rates for normative samples. As will be discussed in this article, difficulties in peer relations are a major cause of loneliness, and children with language disorders are clearly at increased risk for peer relationship difficulties. Indeed, the only [MI Wished study comparing the loneliness of children with specific language disorder and a normative sample suggests this possibility. Fujiki, Brinton, and Todd (1996) recently found that third- through sixth-grade children with specific language disorder reported higher levels of loneliness than age-matched control group from a normative population of children.

Our major goal in this article is to stimulate further attention to the topic of loneliness in children. especially children with language and communication problems. Toward this end we will review what has been learned about loneliness from studies of normative populations.

Research on loneliness in childhood is relatively new, having begun about 15 years ago. This topic is a natural extension of a long-standing scientific interest in children's peer relations (for background reviews, see Asher & Cade, 1991, Asher & Gottman, 1981; Berndt & Ladd. 1989; Bukowski. Newcomb. & Hartup. 1996) Since the

1930s, researchers have studied the behavioral characteristics that lead children to achieve good relationships with their peers. However, until recently, far less research attention has been given to the "interior lives" of children, that is, their emotional reactions to their experiences in the peer group. This gap in our understanding is beginning to be addressed with normative samples of children, and our hope is to stimulate comparable interest in the phenomenon of loneliness among researchers and practitioners who work with children having language and communication difficulties.

One of our subgoals is to highlight recent advances in the conceptualization and assessment of children's peer relations. Children's adjustment in their peer relations involves several different dimensions, including whether children are accepted versus rejected by the group as a whole, whether children succeed in making and keeping close friends, what the quality of children's friendships might be, and whether children are subject to overt victimization by peers. In the course of discussing recent work on loneliness we will describe each of these dimensions, show how they are typically measured, and indicate how each of these dimensions affect children's feelings of loneliness at school.

Another of our subgoals is to stimulate intervention efforts aimed at improving children's peer relations and reducing their feelings of loneliness. Within the peer relations literature, there is now a body of research demonstrating that adults can help children who are having peer relationships difficulties. Some studies use direct instruction methods to teach children relationships skills. Other studies focus on making changes in children's social environment to facilitate improved relationships. Our article will conclude with a discussion of intervention in the hopes of encouraging future efforts. We are optimistic about the chances of improving children's peer relations and reducing their feelings of loneliness.

#### LANGUAGE, COMMUNICATION DISORDER, AND PEER PROBLEMS

It would be expected that Language impairments would influence children's relations with their peers given that, even in normative populations, communicative competence is associated with peer social status. Black and her colleagues conducted studies, of studies exploring the relationship between children's communicative competence and peer social Clailu5. Evidence of less skillful communicative styles in lower sociometric status children was initially presented in Hazen and Black's (1989) Study. For example, preschoolers who were less well liked by their peers were less likely to respond contingently to peers. Black and Hazen 0990 extended these findings by investigating whether such children use similar communication patterns in establishing contact with novel play partners and in maintaining contact with familiar peers. Upon entering ongoing peer play., disliked preschoolers were less responsive and made more irrelevant comments than liked children with both acquainted and unacquainted peers, suggesting that communicative competence deficits may contribute to both the establishment and maintenance of problematic peer relationships. clack and Logan (1995) further examined differences in communicative patterns among two- to five year-old children. Those children who were rejected by their peers were less contingently responsive, took longer conversational turns, made more irrelevant comments and interruptions, and engaged in more simultaneous talking during peer interactions\_ By contrast, popular children engaged in more cohesive conversation and were more likely to alternate conversational turns and to offer explanations to peers.

The communication patterns associated with peer rejection in normative populations closely resemble the communication patterns of children with language impairments. Preschoolers with language and speech impairments, in comparison with their normally developing peers, have been found to be less responsive to peer initiations, and to produce verbal initiations that are more often ignored by peers (Hadley & Rice, 1990, In the same study, preschoolers with speech and language impairments were also more likely than their normally developing peers to address speech to adults and to use short and nonverbal responses with peers, Craig and Washington (1993) found that children with a language impairment had more difficulty than their normally developing peers in joining the play of others, Three out of five young children with language impairments did not enter as the third party in an ongoing interaction dyad during a 20-minute play session, whereas all comparison group children succeeded in quickly joining the interaction. The two children with specific

language impairments who did enter the ongoing interaction did so through nonverbal 1..peluivlots, in Contrast to the verbal entry strategies often employed by comparison group children.

These research findings provide clues that children with a language impairment might be especially likely to have low status among their peers and to experience a contellation of related peer relations problems. Indeed, since the 1980s there has been n marked increase of interest in the social experiences of children with language disorders (Kaiser. 1993), Briuton and Fajiki (1993) and Fajiki and Brinton (1994) have reviewed the literature on peer relations difficulties in children with specific language impairment. Evidence of peer relations difficulties in children with language disorders stems almost entirely from studies of relatively small samples of young children. These studies point to the difficulties encountered by children with language disorders. For example, in a preschool classroom composed of children with normally developing language skills, children with Language impairments, and children learning English as a second language, children with language impairments were the group least likely to be nominated as preferred play partners (Gertner, Rice, & Hadley, 1994). Furthermore, children with language impairments were less likely to have mutual friendships than children in the other two groups. Interestingly. children with receptive language impairments were less liked by their peers, whereas children with expressive language impairments did not deviate from average. Gertner et al. (1994) suggest that receptive impairments may influence peer liking at this young age because they prevent children from successfully joining in other children's play, whereas expressive competence may become increasingly important later on, when there is more emphasis on verbal conversational turns in children's play.

It should be emphasized that children with language disorders face problems not only because of their own skill deficits, but due to peer group dynamics, or because of the limitations of the peer group. Children with language difficulties differ from normally developing children not only in terms of the peer-directed language produced by the child. but also in terms of the peer language received by the child. Normally developing preschoolers are more likely to initiate conversation with other normally developing peers than children with language and speech impairments. Additionally, normally developing peers receive the most verbal initiations from all children (Rice, Sell, & Hadley, 1991). Gallagher (1993) has suggested developmental changes in the manner in which peers respond to others with language impairments, Normally developing young children may be unlikely to make the effort to be understood by children with language impairments or to attempt to interpret poorly articulated speech of children with language impairments. This may be due in part to young peers lacking the perspective-taking skills necessary to realize that certain children have particular communicative needs, and peers not knowing how to ease communication even when special needs are recognized. Also, because more advanced forms of children's play. such as group pretend play, involve relatively sophisticated verbal ability, children with language impairments may find it particularly difficult to take part in age-appropriate play, and their peers may be at more of a loss concerning how to accommodate. As children grow older, other peer group dynamics become relevant, For example. as Gallagher (1993) notes, children of junior high and high school age may be particularly sensitive to belonging to a peer group and to not standing out u different. Although peers at these age levels possess the perspective- taking skills necessary to realize that children with language impairments have certain communicative Reeds, the need to stand span from those who arc "different" may contribute to the exclusion of children with language problems.

## LONELINESS IN CHILDHOOD

Recent evidence that children with language impairments experience a disproportionate share of peer relationship problems raises the concern that they may also suffer negative emotional consequeeces that are linked to peer relationship problems. In research with normative populations, peer rejection has been linked with emotional reactions such as loneliness, low self-esteem, social anxiety, and depression. Our discussion will focus on loneliness, because the relationship between loveliness and children's peer relations has received the most attention in the research literature.

Theorists writing several decades ago questioned whether children had the capability to experience loneliness!. Some writers suggested that the experience of loneliness does not emerge until pre-adolescence or adolescence (Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1973). Perhaps for this reason. loneliness in children came under empirical study for the

first time only 15 years ago. As we will describe, these studies indicate that children have a basic understanding of the meaning of loneliness, that loneliness can be reliably measured in children, and that various dimensions of children's peer adjustment have an effect on feelings of loneliness at school. These studies, then, have not only documented the occurrence of loneliness in childhood, they have also examined aspects of children's relationships with their peers that are related to individual differences in the experience of loneliness in childhood.

One point that should be emphasized is that feelings of loneliness are normative and should not, in and of themselves, be viewed as a sign of pathology. In fact, loneliness can be viewed as the inevitable consequence of forming connections and attachments to people. If a child did not care about having relationships and having certain relationship needs met, the child would not be vulnerable to loneliness. As Asher and Hopmeyer (1997) recently noted: "Even the most socially competent person will sometimes experience loneliness. In deed, it could be argued that participating in relationships makes people more vulnerable to loneliness because of the separations or disappointments that can inevitably occur. A planned get-together with family or friends is canceled, a hoped-for invitation is not forthcoming, a friend moves, a parent dies. In these circumstances, loneliness is an inevitable by-product of a life that involves attachments and connections to others." (p. 279) (Quoted with permission from the National Association of School Psychologists.)

Because loneliness is an inherent part of the human experience, there may be relatively little cause for concern about short-term situational loneliness. Researchers studying individual differences in loneliness distinguish between brief periods of situationally bound loneliness, which are considered normative for both children and adults, and chronic loneliness, which may have serious emotional consequences (see, for example, Peplau & Perlman, 1982). In other words, it is considered normal for children to occasionally experience loneliness when they occasionally lack a playmate or are separated from someone close to them. However, loneliness may pose a serious challenge to healthy social and emotional development for children who experience persistent loneliness over a long period of time.

### *Children's conceptions of loneliness*

Despite early theorists' claims, it does appear that children have a basic understanding of loneliness. Table 1 lists a number of definitions of loneliness offered by researchers. These definitions typically join cognitive and affective elements: The lonely person recognizes that certain aspects of his or her relationships are deficient and the person experiences an unpleasant emotion. When children are asked to give their definitions of loneliness, to describe the conditions that give rise to loneliness, and to say what someone can do to overcome loneliness, the children display an understanding that is similar to the definitions offered by researchers. This understanding has been displayed in studies of third- through fifth-grade regular education students (Hayden, Tarullo, Hymel, 1988), 8- to 11-year-old children with mild mental retardation (Williams & Asher, 1992), and kindergarten and first-grade children in regular education classrooms. For example.,

**Table 1.** Selective summary of definitions of loneliness

Author(s)	Definition
Perlman & Peplau (1982)	"the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some way, either quantitatively or qualitatively" (p. 31).
Ponzetti & Cate (1988)	"a perceived interpersonal problem in which a person's network of relationships is either smaller or less satisfying than desired" (p. 292).
Rook (1984)	"an enduring condition of emotional distress that arises when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others and/or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activities, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy" (p. 1391).
Sullivan (1953)	"the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with an inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy" (p. 290).
Williams (1983)	"the painful awareness of feeling apart from desired or wanted close relationships with others" (p. 52).
Young (1982)	"the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships, accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress that are related to the actual or perceived absence" (p. 380).
Zilborg (1938)	"a feeling of emptiness" (p. 47).

*Note:* These selected definitions are reprinted from "Loneliness in childhood" by S.R. Asher and A. Hopmeyer in a volume edited by G. Bear, K. Minke, and A. Thomas, *Children's Needs II: Development, Problems and Alternatives*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of School Psychologists, 1997. Copyright 1997 by the National Association of School Psychologists. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

in interviews with kindergartners and first graders, 93% of the children referred to loneliness as having both "aloneness" and "sadness" components, whereas only the remaining 7% identified the solitude but not the affective component (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). Sometimes children can be quite articulate and even metaphorical in their descriptions. For example, one of Cassidy and Asher's (1992) young interviewees described the loneliness experience this way: "Like if you're a Mani an, and you don't eh., eh, uh, and you only live on one planet and ...nobody's, um with ya, on that planet," Children are also able to identify the conditions that elicit feelings of loneliness. For example, Hayden et al.'s (1988) respondents understood that loneliness can result from conflicts and broken loyalties, as well as from solitude.

However it would be a mistake to exaggerate the sophistication of young children's understanding. For example, relatively few young children (only 11% in Cassidy & Asher's 1992 study) think that a person can be lonely when with others. Still, the fact [that even young children have what might be termed a basic understanding of the meaning of loneliness indicates that it should be possible for children to give meaningful answers to questions about their feelings of loneliness in everyday life.

### *Formal assessments of loneliness*

During the mid-1980s, several measures of loneliness in children were described in the literature (Asher et al., 1984; Heinlein & Spinner, 1985; Marcoen & Brumagae, 1985) and since that time a variety of modifications, as well as new measures, have been created (for a review, see Terrell, Deutsch, in press). The most widely used measure in studies of children's peer relations is the 'Awls Bowlines' and Social Dissatisfaction Scale (Asher et al., 1984) and the variations on that measure that followed in later research. The measure was used originally with third- through sixth- grade children in regular education classrooms, and has been adapted since for kindergarten and first-grade children (Barth & Parke, 1993; Cassidy & Asher, 1994) middle school students (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992), and for students in middle elementary school who have mild mental retardation & Asher, 1992). The scale has also repeatedly yielded high internal reliability for older children (Cronbach's alphas of 0.90 and above), and acceptable, but slightly lower internal reliability for kindergartners and first

graders (Cronbach's alpha of 0.19). Measures developed by Marcoen and Brumagne (1985) and by Heinlein and Spinner (1985) also yielded evidence of excellent internal reliability. So there is now evidence from several different measures (and from several different parts of the world), that children answer questions about loneliness in an internally consistent manner. Incidentally, repeating assessments of loneliness over time (Hymel, Freigang, Franke, Both, Bream, & Borys, 1990, Renshaw & Brown, 1993), indicates that feelings of loneliness are fairly stable over 10 weeks (e.g.,  $r = 0.66$ ) and even a year (e.g.,  $r = 0.56$ ). The magnitude of these correlations suggests that children who are highly lonely at OTIC time are more likely to be lonely later, but that there is also some instability in loneliness over time, a feeling that fits with the assumption that loneliness can be situational as well as chronic.

The Box, "Illinois Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire:"\* provides an

### Illinois Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire

1. It's easy for me to make new friends at school.
2. I like to read.†
3. I have nobody to talk to in class.
4. I'm good at working with other children in my class.
5. I watch TV a lot.†
6. It's hard for me to make friends at school.\*
7. I like school.†
8. I have lots of friends in my class.
9. I feel alone at school.\*
10. I can find a friend in my class when I need one.
11. I play sports a lot.†
12. It's hard to get kids in school to like me.\*
13. I like science.†
14. I don't have anyone to play with at school.\*
15. I like music.†
16. I get along with my classmates.
17. I feel left out of things at school.\*
18. There's no other kids I can go to when I need help in school.\*
19. I like to paint and draw.†
20. I don't get along with other children in school.\*
21. I'm lonely at school.\*
22. I am well liked by the kids at school.
23. I like playing board games a lot.†
24. I don't have any friends in class.\*

*Note:* The total score on this scale is the sum of the 16 primary (i.e., non-filler) items. The items with an asterisk are those for which response order is reversed in scoring. Items with a plus sign are filler items. Items 9, 17, and 21 are "pure" loneliness items and have the highest loadings in factor analyses of the measure. From "Children's loneliness: a comparison of rejected and neglected peer status" by S. R. Asher and V. A. Wheeler, 1985, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 53, p. 502. Copyright 1985 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

example of one of these measures (Asher Wheeler, 1985), the version we have used to assess school-based loneliness in elementary school children. This version involved a minor modification of the original Asher et al. (1984) measure; in the version in the Box all items have an explicit reference to the school context, whereas the original measure worded most of the items more generally (e.g., "I feel left out of things at school" versus "I feel left out of things"). In both versions, the measure contains "tiller" items aimed at giving a more varied affective tone to the questionnaire. Also, as can be seen, only some of the primary items focus directly on feelings of loneliness. Other items ask children about their appraisals of their current peer relationships (e.g., "I have lots of friends in my class"), their perceptions of their social competence ("I'm good at working with other children in my class"), and whether they think that certain important relationship needs are being met ("There's no other kids I can go to when I need help in school"). In the version shown in the Box, children answer these items on a live-point scale with regard to how often each statement is true about them. In the measures for



younger children and for students with cognitive disabilities children respond to items that are presented as questions (e.g., "Are you lonely at school?") rather than statements, and they answer on a three-point scale (e.g., yes, sometimes, no) not a live- point scale. In factor analyses of the measure reported to date. The 16 primary items have loaded on one factor and the items most directly assessing loneliness (see items 9, 17, and 21 in the Box) are the highest loading items. This suggests that although the item content of the 16 primary

**Loneliness in Contexts  
Questionnaire**

1. Do you like to do math at school?†
2. Do you feel sad and alone in your classroom?\*
3. Do you like to read at school?†
4. Is the lunchroom a lonely place for you?\*
5. Do you like to play sports at school?†
6. Are you lonely in P.E.?\*
7. Do you like going on field trips with your class?†
8. Do you feel sad and alone on the play-ground?\*
9. Do you like to draw and paint at school?†
10. Is the classroom a lonely place for you?\*
11. Do you like going to the library at school?†
12. Are you lonely in the lunchroom?\*
13. Do you like music class at school?†
14. Do you feel sad and alone in P.E.?\*
15. Do you like making reports to the class?†
16. Is the playground a lonely place for you?\*
17. Do you like to work on group projects at school?†
18. Are you lonely in your classroom?\*
19. Do you like reading books at school?†
20. Do you feel sad and alone in the lunchroom?\*
21. Do you like to play games at school?†
22. Is P.E. a lonely place for you?\*
23. Do you like doing homework?†
24. Are you lonely on the playground?\*
25. Do you like to write stories at school?†
26. Do you like having parties in your classroom at school?†
27. Do you like school assemblies?†

*Note:* From Asher, Hopmeyer, and Gabriel (1998). Items with an asterisk are primary items. The items indicated by a dagger are filler items. Responses to the 12 primary items can be summed to create a total loneliness score, or subscores can be created based on children's responses to the four separate contexts.

items is diverse, there is a strong loneliness component to the measure.

Still, the diversity of item content suggests the need for a measure of loneliness that includes items directed more exclusively at feelings of loneliness. One way to accomplish this is to only use "pure" loneliness items, but for each item to ask children about loneliness in different school contexts, thereby creating a large pool of loneliness items, The Box "Loneliness in Contexts Questionnaire," shows a recently developed measure (Asher,



Hopmeyer, & Gabriel, 1995) that adopts this approach. One side benefit of the measure is that it can be used not only to derive a total loneliness score, but to learn about how children feel in each of several distinct school contexts (i.e., the classroom, physical education, the lunchroom, and the playground). Indeed, the measure yields internally reliable scores for each context as well as for the total measure. This means that the measure can be used to obtain reliable information about how children are experiencing various contexts that they encounter throughout the school day.

## DIMENSIONS OF PEER ADJUSTMENT AND THE DETERMINANTS OF LONELINESS

What does it mean for a child to be making a good peer adjustment? How does someone know that children are doing well in their peer relations? Researchers, educators, clinicians, and parents would agree that peer adjustment is a multifaceted concept (see Hartup, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1993a). In this section, we will describe various dimensions of peer adjustment, discuss how each dimension can be measured, and review evidence that each dimension is associated with feelings of loneliness (for extended discussions and reviews, see Asher, Hopmeyer, 1997; Asher, 1997; Parker, Saxon, Asher, & Kovacs, in press).

### *Peer acceptance*

One aspect of peer adjustment involves being accepted rather than rejected by peers. This is a fundamental dimension that involves whether the child is liked versus disliked and included rather than excluded. Researchers typically assess this dimension using sociometric measures. One type of sociometric method involves giving every child a printed roster of all classmates and asking children to rate how much they like to play with (or be in activities with) each of the other members of the class. Children in elementary school typically do these ratings on a five-point scale where a higher rating is indicative of higher degrees of liking (Singleton & Asher, 1977). Children in preschool can do these ratings by being individually interviewed and shown individual photographs rather than a typed class roster (Asher, Singleton, Tinsley, & Hyrnie, 1979). Also, with young children, a three-point scale rather than a five-point scale, can be used. Regardless of the age of the sample or the type of rating-scale options, children are given an acceptance score based on the average rating they receive from peers, with a higher average score indicative of greater liking or acceptance by peers.

A somewhat different sociometric measure of the acceptance/rejection dimension involves asking children to nominate the three classmates (or grademates) who they like most and to indicate the names of the three children they like least (e.g., Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982). Children are given separate rosters for these two types of nomination questions. By being asked to circle names rather than write down names on a blank page, possible memory or spelling problems are avoided. The nominations children receive from peers on these two nomination questions are then used to classify children as (1) popular (receiving many positive nominations and few negative nominations), (2) rejected (receiving few positive nominations and many negative nominations), (3) neglected (receiving few positive nominations and few negative nominations), (4) controversial (receiving many positive nominations and many negative nominations), or (5) average (receiving an average number of positive and negative nominations). As with the rating-scale measure, this procedure can readily be adapted for young children by using photographs of classmates and conducting individual interviews (McCandless & Marshall, 1957).

Research on the links between acceptance versus rejection and children's feelings of loneliness indicate an association between peer rejection and loneliness regardless of which type of sociometric measure is used. Children who get low ratings from peers on the rating-scale measure report more loneliness than children who are described as better liked by their peers. Likewise, children who receive many negative nominations and few positive nominations are more likely than popular children to report loneliness. This pattern of association holds in middle school (Parkhurst St. Asher, 1992), in the middle elementary school years (e.g., Asher et al., 1984; Asher & Wheeler, 1985; Crick & Ladd, 1993), and in kindergarten and first grade (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). Interestingly, this pattern holds even when children's feeling of loneliness are assessed contextually. Asher et al. (1998) recently found that low-accepted children reported more loneliness than better accepted children in each of four contexts: the playground, the lunchroom, physical education, and even the classroom. Apparently, there is no safe haven for children who are rejected when it comes to feeling lonely at school.

### *Participation in friendship*

Whether or not children have friends is a distinct, although somewhat overlapping, dimension of peer adjustment (e.g., Bukowski & Roza, 1989; Parker & Asher, 1993a). Whereas peer acceptance refers to how well a child is liked by the group as a whole, friendship refers to a close dyadic relationship, one characterized by mutual affection and a shared history. Whether children have friends can be directly assessed by asking children to indicate (on a roster or by pointing to photos) the names of their best friends in their class, grade level, or school. Children can be asked to indicate a limited number of friends (eg, three best friends), or children can be left unrestricted in the nominations they are asked to make. Either way, children can then be identified as having a friend when the person they name as a friend also names them. This reciprocity of nomination is critical if one views friendship as a relationship in which both parties to the relationship agree about its nature. Research indicates that there are children who are poorly accepted overall by peers yet have friends, and that some children who are well accepted by peers overall nonetheless lack friends (Parker et al., in press). Furthermore, it is clear from the existing research that friendship makes a contribution to feelings of loneliness versus well-being that is independent of the contribution of peer acceptance (Parker & Asher, 1993b; Renshaw & Brown, 1993). In other words, having a friend has an effect on a child's level of loneliness that is above and beyond the effect of a child's level of acceptance. Interestingly, in terms of loneliness, it does not seem to make much difference how many friends a child has as long as the child has at least one. It also appears to be important for children to have friends that endure because research suggests that children who make new friends, but whose friendships do not last, derive less benefit from these friendships in terms of being protected from feelings of loneliness (Parker & Seal, 1996).

### *Friendship quality*

The third dimension of peer adjustment concerns not just whether a child has friends, but what those friendships are like. It seems plausible that a child's emotional life will be affected not only by whether the child has a friend but by the specific character of the friendship. The Box "Children's Descriptions of Their Best Friend," presents quotes from third- to fifth-grade children describing their best friend. As these quotes nicely illustrate, some friendships provide children with considerable emotional support, whereas others can actually be a source of conflict and stress. Some friendships are characterized by high levels of companionship and recreation, even a sense of spirited adventure, whereas others may be lower on these qualities. Some friends can be counted on to be reliable allies and to provide instrumental help when needed. Some friends are good at getting over their disagreements, whereas for others resolving conflicts is extremely difficult. Friendships differ in these ways, as well as others, and so researchers

### Children's Descriptions of Their Best Friend

"He is my very best friend because he tells me things and I tell him things. He shows me a basketball move and I show him too, and he never makes me sad."

"Me and Diana can count on trusting one another. Yesterday me and Diana talked about how our parents got a divorce and how the world is going to end."

"My friend is really nice. Once my nose was bleeding around a gallon every 30 minutes and he helped me."

"Jessica has problems at home and with her religion and when something happens she always comes to me and talks about it. We've been through a lot together."

"We love to be weird. We're never weird when the other is not there."

"Me and Tiff share our deepest darkest secrets and we talk about boys, when we grow up, and shopping."

"Someone bullied me and Carl stuck up for me and the kid hardly does it any more."

"Me and Lemar makes each other laugh and we play kick soccer."

"Me and Kelly really don't talk about personal things. We mostly just play with each other."

"Me and Alexis act like we're cousins. We play a lot together. She comes over my house a lot. Alexis comes and talks with me when I'm sad. She says we are best friends. I help her with her homework. She helps me with my homework. And we play a lot together."

"I fight with Michelle too much and I really feel bad about it but I can't stop. I'm afraid she wouldn't like me any more."

"Angie is very special to me. If we get in a fight we always say sorry. And if she says she would play with me, she plays with me."

"She has another friend in our class named Charlene. Charlene always plays with Cindy. Me and Charlene don't always get along so I don't get to do much with Cindy because Charlene won't let me."

"Tammy is really forgiving. She understands when I pick partners other than her."

"Becky always talks behind my back. It hurts my feelings. I will tell Becky something and she tells her other friends. And she always calls me and pranks me. And sometimes she can't keep a secret. And lies to me. Sometimes she isn't a great friend. But sometimes she's a fine friend!"

"Paul is not a critic."

*Note.* These quotes are reprinted from "Beyond group acceptance: Friendship adjustment and friendship quality as distinct dimensions of children's peer adjustment" by J.G. Parker and S.R. Asher in a volume edited by D. Perlman and W.H. Jones, *Advances in Personal Relationships* (Vol. 4, pp. 261-294). London: Kingsley. 1993. Copyright 1993 by Kingsley and reprinted by permission of the publisher.

have come to realize that no description of the influence of friendship on Loneliness would be complete without attention to the qualitative aspects of children's close relationships.

Several different measures have been developed to assess the quality of children's best friendships (e.g., Berndt et al., 1986; Bukowski, Hoza, Boivin, 1994; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Parker & Asher, 1993b). The Parker and Asher (1993b) Friendship Quality Questionnaire has been used to examine the linkages between friendship quality and children's loneliness at school. In this measure, children are given 40 items to assess six different aspects of friendship: (1) companionship and recreation, (2) help and guidance, (3) validation and caring, (4) intimate exchange, (5) conflict and betrayal, and (6) conflict resolution. Each item is presented to the child with the child's best friend's name embedded in the item (e.g., "Jamie and I always play together at recess") and so the child is describing his or her best friend on each of 40 items that assess six different features of friendship. These six different features were found by Parker and Asher (1993b) to make independent contributions to children's feelings of loneliness, even after statistically controlling for children's level of peer acceptance. In other words, it helps children to be in a high-quality friendship, regardless of their level of acceptance by peers.

### *Victimization by peers*

A fourth dimension of peer adjustment involves whether children are receiving overt harsh treatment from their peers. Research with normative populations has begun to document the extent to which children are overtly victimized by peers; approximately 10% of children appear to be highly victimized by their peers (Olweus, 1978; Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Peer victimization may range from the kind of verbal teasing that is intended to be hurtful to more extreme forms such as physical aggression. Sometimes children are victimized by a single other child and sometimes victimization takes the form of "mobbing" in which a group of children gang up on an other child. Olweus (1978, 1993) deserves considerable credit for twilling attention to the pervasive problem of bullying in school, and there is now Li Browing research literature addressed to understanding and preventing this problem in schools.

It is clear that children who are poorly accepted by their peers are at a greater risk for victimization by their peers (e.g., Perry et al., 1988; Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996), it has also been recently documented that children who have more friends are less likely to be victimized by their peers (Hodges, Malone, & Perry, 1997). In other words, being accepted by peers and having friends are both protective factors in terms of being victimized by peers. The child who is both poorly accepted by others and who lacks friends will be particularly vulnerable.

The association between being victimized by peers and loneliness has now been directly documented in several studies (e.g., Boivin & Hymel, 1997; Boivin, & Bukowski, 1995; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Williams, 1998). In each study, children who are victimized by peers report greater loneliness than nonvictimized children. For example, Boivin et al. (1995) found support for a model in which victimization mediates the relationship between social withdrawal and loneliness. Socially withdrawn children who experienced victimization were particularly likely to report elevated levels of loneliness. Furthermore, Boivin et al. (1995) found moderate support for loneliness as a contributor to depression in withdrawn children. Most studies of loneliness in childhood have investigated loneliness as an outcome variable rather than as a contributor to depression or other negative emotional outcomes. Boivin et al.'s (1995) study is unusual in its consideration of loneliness not only as an outcome of relational and behavioral characteristics, but also as a contributor to further "internalizing" problems. The relationship between loneliness and other sorts of internalizing problems such as social anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression is in need of attention from researchers and practitioners. These interconnected emotional problems may be especially relevant for language impaired populations, given preliminary indications that children with language disorders may be especially prone to problems of an internalizing nature (Fujiki et al., 1996).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION**

The research discussed in this paper indicates that children's feelings of loneliness are influenced by distinct dimensions of peer adjustment: acceptance by peers, participation in friendship, the quality of children's friendships, and whether children are overtly victimized by their peers. Since each of these dimensions, as well as loneliness, can be reliably assessed, researchers and clinicians can obtain a fairly comprehensive picture of children's peer relationships and their emotional responses to those relationships. We would encourage professionals interested in promoting children's social competence to focus on these dimensions and to include assessments of children's functioning in these areas,

The research reviewed in this paper also suggests a framework for helping children who are experiencing high levels of loneliness at school. Given that peer relationship problems in childhood are associated with early school adjustment difficulties (e.g., Ladd, 1990) and with later school drop-out (Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987), there is a compelling case for giving top priority attention to this aspect of children's functioning. The fact that all four dimensions of peer adjustment are associated with loneliness suggests that it should be possible to reduce loneliness by improving children's functioning with respect to each dimension. A detailed treatment of the topic of intervention is beyond the scope of this article, however it should be emphasized that adults are not helpless when it comes to helping children with peer relationship difficulties. To the contrary, adults have the opportunity to make a significant difference in these aspects of chil-

dren's lives. Adults can have influence by teaching children critical social interaction skills and by designing the social environment in ways that promote acceptance and friendship and -decrease the likelihood of victimization. Various programs exist that are consistent with these instructional and managerial objectives. We know, for example, that it is possible to improve children's peer acceptance through direct instruction in social relation skills (e.g., Bierman, 1986; Ladd, 1981; Oden Asher, 1977) and suggestions have recently been made for how to promote friendship through relationship skills training (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996; Selman 1990). Likewise, it is possible to decrease victimization in school through clear articulation of school policy and a system-wide commitment to enforcing school policy (see Olweus, 1993).

Of the four dimensions of peer adjustment discussed in this paper, improving children's acceptance by peers has been the most frequent focus of intervention efforts. Asher et al. recently reviewed 15 studies in which children who were poorly accepted by peers received some form of direct instruction in social relationship skills. Of these studies, 11 reported significant gains in peer acceptance compared to the children in control groups. Although the studies with positive outcomes differ in many ways, certain commonalities exist across them (see Troop & Asher, in press, for a recent discussion of these commonalities). Here we will highlight one particular feature that has considerable practical relevance to clinicians working with children in settings where they can pair children, with a peer for dyadic game-playing sessions.

Beginning with Oden and Asher (1977) several social skill training studies have used a two-person game-playing context for teaching social relationship skills. The general format is to discuss with the focal child certain ideas that "might help make games fun," to then pair that child with an average status child for a game-playing session, and then to meet with the child again after the game playing to have the child reflect on the game-playing experience in light of the concepts previously discussed.

The game-playing context is an attractive one for several different reasons. (1) This is a context in which children can be taught ideas about playing with others that have broad generality, ideas such as the importance of cooperating, participating, being responsive, being supportive, making constructive suggestions, communicating contingently, asking questions, etc. (2) Games provide a context for children to try out ideas such as these and then have a chance afterward to discuss with the adult whether the ideas were helpful and whether they helped make the game "fun to play." (3) By emphasizing relationship-oriented goals rather than the competitive side of game playing, the adult has the chance to subtly direct children's attention toward the goals of having fun, getting along with the other person, etc. rather than other types of goals such as winning, looking good, avoiding embarrassment, etc. (see Taylor & Asher, 1980). The game situation also contains many subtasks, such as initiating play, taking turns, negotiating rules, resolving conflict, and coping with success or failure. As such, the game context is well suited for helping children learn how to manage the many challenging social tasks that arise in every day life. The game context is also fun for children so there is little need to motivate children to participate in sessions. Games also provide a context for average status peers to interact with a child and to discover that playing with the child can be fun. This is important for helping to overcome negative reputations that many unpopular children have acquired over time (see Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990). (4) This context gives children a chance to learn how to play a variety of games and, over multiple sessions, to become more accomplished at the games. The many years of research on the behavioral factors that lead to peer acceptance indicate that children benefit not only from having a range of pro-social skills but also from being competent at activities that the peer group values. Helping children avoid or overcome chronic loneliness involves helping children develop a wide range of competencies and the game context is ideally suited for pursuing this goal.

In research on the peer interactions of children with language disorders, attention has been given to two types of social tasks, entry into ongoing interaction and the maintenance of contingent communication. These are important social tasks that merit further attention, yet, there are many other social tasks that may be difficult for children with language disorders. By broadening the range of social situations examined we would have the opportunity to learn how children with language disorders respond to tasks such as making requests, dealing with conflict, responding to teasing, helping or comforting others, etc. Furthermore, the inclusion of behavioral

variables such as aggression, withdrawal, or prosocial behavior that are widely known to affect peer relations in samples of normally developing children, could greatly advance existing knowledge of the interpersonal functioning of children with language disorders. There is also the need to study the peer relations of children with language disorders at different age levels, since the types of tasks that children confront and the types of skills that are needed can vary. As children grow older they come to face an increasingly complex social world that poses diverse social tasks and many opportunities for social failure as well as social success. A derailed appreciation of the skills needed to succeed will help us to assist children with developmental problems.

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